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ABSTRACT

The older tradition of native American literature is discussed in terms of the systems of values which we bring to it, as well as those embedded in it. The analysis leads to a statement of some of the strengths of recent native American literature, which carries from the past some of the value judgments that have always kept the group or the tribe intact. The essential conflict has been with people whose words and values systems do not match. The overall analysis suggests that some understanding of ourselves goes hand in hand with any proper investigation of the distant past. (AA)

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THE DEEP STRUCTURE CONTENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

In this paper I intend to present a definition and draw a comparison. Both, hopefully, will illuminate certain characteristics of the older tradition of Native American literature, as well as indicate to some degree a possible common ground between the old and the new. The definition which is here formulated suggests simply that this literature comes in three parts, variously labeled or categorized, and that in terms of its human referent, or in essence, a problem of identity is involved. This feature of the literature, or this identity, is then assigned a value in order to show how it may be viewed across the span of centuries, or in relation to early and modern human beings. The comparison assumes, in other words, that some understanding of ourselves goes hand in hand with any proper investigation of the distant past.

It should be noted particularly that nothing of the seed and onion type of development is here intended, for each world-view is seen as fairly complete. It is true, however, that language itself, as well as the specific culture embedded there, tends to hold us to our own time and place. This is a way of saying that our modern genres do not often apply to the distant past, if we have in mind our Western literature, and also a way

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of saying that the best or finest of Indian thought and ideas is seen through a cultural lens, which, regrettably, must leave our final evaluations suspect. Yet, the care with which any probing of the past should be undertaken, as well as the precise use of categories, seems apparent when any one of several scientific or scholarly researchers proceeds to document his views. Joseph Campbell, for instance, besides writing extensively of by-gone eras, is especially helpful when he speaks of the different emphases that one may place on material from the past. Either, he suggests, we recount endlessly the differences that we observe, or we attempt to find meaningful patterns. The two aspects, he writes, "correspond to Adolph Bastian's 'elementary ideas' (Elementargedanke) and 'ethnic ideas' (Völkergedanke)." The former, it is clear, "are never experienced directly, in a pure state, abstracted from the locally conditioned ethnic ideas through which they are substantialized." Professor Campbell explains as follows:

> We may therefore think of any myth or rite either as a clue to what may be permanent or universal in human nature (in which case our emphasis will be psychological, or perhaps even metaphysical), or, on the other hand, as a function of the local scene, the landscape, the history, and the sociology of the folk concerned (in which case our approach will be ethnological or historical).[1]

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[1] The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 461.

The distinctions are exact, as well as enlightening. The ideas of every past age, it is suggested, must yield to one approach or another. And, understandably, no mention is made of a literary approach, which here must be defined as obtaining information about or simply getting acquainted with the great ideas of another group of people. This is, you may notice, an Arnoldian sense of literature and the one that is presumably the most applicable to the older tradition of Native American literature.[2]

Campbell, at the last of his book, offers, too, his own tripartite description of early man when he speaks of the "bondages of love, power, and virtue." The formal terms for this particular trio are taken from classical Indian philosophy and are described as follows:

> The ends for which men strive in the world are three--no more, no less; namely: love and pleasure (kāma), power and success (artha: pronounced "art-ha"), and lawful order and moral virtue (dharma).[3]

An equivalent series in Western terms would very likely be represented by the ideas of such writers as Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and St. Paul.

It must here be noted that the final item in the series is the only one which is not in the category of basic drives, or

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[2]For a discussion of various literary approaches, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr. "'Intrinsic' Criticism," College English 36 (December 1974): 446-457.

[3]Campbell, p. 464.

operating, perhaps, as a function of biology, but is, rather, an "aim instilled in the young by education." It is also the area in which, according to Campbell, a real difference between the East and the West can be observed. The Western emphasis, history seems to tell us, is on an understanding of the world, while the East, on the other hand, emphasizes "communities of shared experience." Professor Campbell writes as follows:

> Since the period of the Renaissance, we of the West have come to believe that the proper aim of education is the inculcation of information about the world in which we live. This, however, was not the aim in the past, nor is it the aim in the Orient (in which I include Russia) to this day. The aim of education in the primitive, archaic, and Oriental spheres has always been and will no doubt continue to be, for many centuries, not primarily to enlighten the mind concerning the nature of the universe, but to create communities of shared experience for the engagement of the sentiments of the growing individual in the matters of chief concern to the local group.[4]

Certainly, it is true that observable differences lead to generalties, but it would be inappropriate here, no doubt, to think that the differences are equally balanced. It should be noted, too, that the author does offer some characterization of the present, but whether or not the link between the past and present is stated as clearly as it could be may be questioned.

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[4]Ibid., p. 466.

No doubt the ground is thoroughly covered in the three succeeding volumes by this same author, but as the material there moves predominantly westward the reader is left once again in the vast silences of an early Indian world, and left, too, I believe, with a sense of important things left unsaid.

The thought, for instance, that comes first to mind concerns an implication in the passage quoted above--barely beneath the surface, perhaps--namely, that the matrix which is "primitive, archaic, and Oriental," in its successive developments, leads to a form of government antithetical to our own. One, here, I think, can hardly disagree; the direction is clearly there. It should be added, however, that two very different plants may possibly grow in this particular flower bed. Such a mild correction, obviously, does not go far. Few, in fact, would care to pursue the idea. Certainly, I do not commit myself to do so, but I do commit myself to shedding some light on what may be called "the American arrangement" (which I will now proceed to work toward).

My particular view, then, still makes use of the triadic series in that a nature-man-spirit identity is suggested, though with a slightly different description of the three items. Nature, for instance, may indeed indicate "love and pleasure," but it also points toward, in E. Adamson Hoebel's words, a "combination of vitalistic and mechanistic attitudes toward the universe."[5]

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[5] The Cheyennes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 82.

Animism and fatalism, in effect, suggest the working out of forces which only the properly prepared individual could move with or against. Fortunate the man who walked in balance with such powers, for there was in nature a trickster element, a clown figure who followed a short distance behind the more serious priests and whose very presence signaled the unpredictable in nature and, indeed, the presence of chaos in the very midst of order.

Likewise, the man-identity is predicated on a constantly tested adherence to principle, which, in its group or tribal allegiance, may be termed the reality of the center. Certainly the political minded man who desires to rise to a station of eminence searches for ways to force the issue, as did Two Leggings of the Crows. It means, however, that one becomes locked into the culture, as many Indian leaders were, while lesser figures were not. On a larger scale it means, too, that diversity is preserved, which, if translated to the American side, meant also that some way had to be found to allow for religious or denominational differences. In this sense, at least, the "matrix" carries the seed of confederation (read here the League of the Iroquois), as well as that of a more rigidly ordered community (read here the Pueblos).

Finally, the third and most important of the series--the spirit-identity--is here termed, simply, a special kind of silence. In the literature it is stated paradoxically, as it is, perhaps, in all cultures, while being at the same time of

paramount importance to all. In its widest application it is nationalism, or world-federalism, or tribalism (all three of which, of course, are opposed to each other), and at its most intense it is, as Professor Mircea Eliade points out, a kind of ecstasy.[6] Among early people, also, a difference can be noted between a hunting and a planting society, in that, in the former, animals tend to be sacrificed and in the latter human beings. The goriest examples, therefore, come from Mesoamerica, though one remembers, too, the more legendary account of "The Origin of Indian Corn" from the Ojibway of the Great Lakes region.[7] Nevertheless, a kind of universal statement on the matter is given by one of the rugged Eskimo shamans of the north, when he says,

> 'The only true wisdom lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and it can be reached only through suffering. Privation and suffering alone can open the mind of a man to all that is hidden to others.'[8]

The many ritual modulations and related human postures that surround this statement, and over a great period of time, become, finally, the essential stance of early man on this continent.

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[6] Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (New York: Random House, 1964).

[7] Campbell, pp. 216-220, 222-224, and 293.

[8] Ibid., p. 54.

As a value system, it must be termed, quite simply, theological, for harmony and oneness with all things, as well as group solidarity, were of primary concern. The idea of completeness, with all that this term implies, received strong expression on many parts of the continent, but was, perhaps, for that very reason, a vulnerable point. Whether this special sense of community can ever be fully realized in a modern society, or whether, indeed, it should be, is at least a question which suggests a final comparison.

Various ways, no doubt, have been used to describe modern man. Here the attempt is made through axiology, that is, the study of value. According to Campbell's description of early man and my more restricted view of a New World identity, the formulations clearly suggest a three-in-one composition, or a dynamic blend which made possible an early worldview. From an examination of our own make-up, primarily in terms of values, however, it seems closer to the truth to say that early man explained things to himself under a one-valued system, with four consciousness areas in abeyance, or, at least, working at minimal levels (relatively speaking, of course). That is, modern man makes use of five value systems, which can be subsumed under the class headings politics, theology, science, aesthetics, and technology. In each of these systems there is, respectively, the pursuit of power, unity, knowledge, beauty, and efficiency. Each of these systems, to the extent that data is stored or refined, may be thought of as memory banks and, indeed, as

functional varieties of the language itself.

Nature, for instance, to the political system would mean control; to the theological system it would be a testing ground and a passing phenomenon on our way into the beyond; to the scientific system it would be a textbook, or the ultimate realm of discourse; to the aesthetic system it would be the teacher and the most reliable frame of reference; and to the technological system it would be the workable but rather inefficient producer. The rather abstract language that we speak can therefore be coded, depending upon our expertise or our specialty. Clearly, no man operates in all systems, but with even five the number of combinations is very great. And, to the extent that modern man uses these value systems and arrives at a course of action, one surmises that an ideal ratio among them would be, again, composed of a three-part scheme, i.e., the technological value system is to the scientific (nature) as the aesthetic value system is to the theological (spirit). Both technology and aesthetics, in other words, permit the other two to be functional, for both the scientific and the theological lay claim to special knowledge. Each makes an effort to be as convincing as possible. Each tends to define or limit deity, but in so doing their greatest impact is on the villages of men. And all four together have a vested interest in keeping the maverick--the political value system--happy and honest; or, to use Ralph Barton Perry's term, one hopes to achieve harmonious happiness.[9] Man, in short, is

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[9] Realms of Value (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 104.

a political animal, but in a deeper sense his very essence is language itself, at least of a kind that reaches out in various directions in an attempt to explore and define its world.

Further, it is not unusual to think that modern man, for his part, has retained his former nature-man-spirit identity, but only, one might say, as seen through the spiritual lens, or as it is projected by the theological value system. Martin Buber, one may notice, in his book, I and Thou, speaks of the "spheres in which the world of relation [to the Centre, or to the primal Source] is built":

> First, our life with nature, in which the relation clings to the threshold of speech.
>
> Second, our life with men, in which the relation takes on the form of speech.
>
> Third, our life with spiritual beings, where the relation, being without speech, yet begets it.
>
> Every sphere is compassed in the eternal Thou, but it is not compassed in them.
>
> Through every sphere shines the one present.[10]

The substantive matter here, once again, is unity and how it pervades nature, man, and our relation to the spirit. But, although the terms are similar to those I have applied to the

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[10] I and Thou (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 101.

Indian, the corresponding value judgments attached to the word symbols cannot be checked.

A reading of the mythic stories of the early peoples of this continent suggests that death was only a transition to another world, quite similar to this one. Usually the journey was toward the west, where the sky and the land met. The passage was difficult, but certain special informers--the psychopomps, the medicine men--said that even a round trip was possible. And, of course, there is security in knowing that someone knows. But--as to Buber's statement--all that can be said is that one line of consciousness from the past is here presented in one of its ripest and most intellectualized aspects. Notice also that a non-paraphrasable content, in "our life with spiritual beings," may be indicated--a mystical awareness of the supernatural, in other words, that tends to influence our speech. Certainly, then, when we peer into that distant past, what we perceive is a long road that leads to the present, and it is ourselves, or human beings much like ourselves, who have traveled the distance. Small wonder, then, that the theological value system is always turned to when we want to give meaning to words like community, society, people, family, and nation.

If these remarks, therefore, are believable, or acceptable, then it is but a small matter to state the built-in strength of recent Native American literature (or, by extension, the Indian in literature), for it carries from the past some of the value judgments that have always kept the group or the tribe intact.

Its essential conflict has been with people whose words and whose value systems do not match up. Indeed, most of our literature in America is a mild or vehement protest against the damage which has been done to the human spirit. The intolerance, the racism, the mediocrity, the incompleteness, and the incompetence, ever present, are still afflictions which follow, as it were, only a short distance behind. An early statement of conflicts of this kind, worth noting, comes from Plenty-Coups, the Crow Chief:

> They spoke very loudly when they said their laws were made for everybody; but we soon learned that although they expected us to keep them, they thought nothing of breaking them themselves. They told us not to drink whiskey, yet they made it themselves and traded it to us for furs and robes until both were nearly gone. Their Wise Ones said we might have their religion, but when we tried to understand it we found that there were too many kinds of religion among white men for us to understand, and that scarcely any two white men agreed which was the right one to learn. This bothered us a good deal until we saw that the white man did not take his religion any more seriously than he did his laws, and that he kept both of them just behind him, like Helpers, to use when they might do him good in his dealings with strangers. These were not our ways. We kept the laws we made and lived our religion. We have never been able to understand the

white man, who fools nobody but himself.[11]

Very likely, Plenty-Coups and his small tribe did not encounter the finest flowers of Western civilization (and, indeed, the examples are still difficult to locate). On the other hand, not all Indians were of the stature of a Plenty-Coups. His complaint, too, about the many religions among the whites has also a rather hollow ring, for each tribe on the continent (well over 200) was somewhat equivalent to the religious denominations of the early American settlers, with the added proviso that one had almost to be born (literally) into the tribe to be accepted by it. The Americans on their side, however, had their version of this ancient requirement when they looked down on all who were without a white skin. The Indians, to a certain extent, have brought their factionalism into the present; the Americans, also to a certain extent, have dealt with the problem by separating church and state. The division, perhaps, cannot be overstressed, for it has split asunder two of the most troublesome value systems known to man. The latter solution, however, still leaves the question of what it is you join when you become an American. Very likely it is a combinations of small tribes, or, as they are termed today, various interest groups.

In any case, the ideal way is still to be born an American. This entitles you to struggle most of your life for an education,

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[11] Frank B. Linderman, Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1930), p. 227 f.

which, if you do obtain, can be, or fortunately may be, ecumenical in nature, but also, with equal effort, can as easily be, unfortunately, narrowly oriented to one particular value system. If completeness has any meaning in this scheme of things, then, to the extent that we do not understand the world about us, just to that extent are we incomplete. The emphasis in this statement, of course, comes from the scientific value system, but at present this sphere of influence has proven to be, and very likely will continue to be, our most reliable source of information. To see beauty, however, in obscure bits of information--in the words and deeds of early Americans who first inhabited this continent--is to feel the aesthetic value system at work. To want to use this information to better yourself, or to bolster your self-esteem, is to use the political value system. To want to do it quickly and with the least effort and at the lowest possible cost is to apply the technological value system. And to do these things in order to eventually help others, or to try to draw people closer together, is to use the theological value system. In any case, there is still a long road ahead for all of us. Thank you for your attention.

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